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Classical Music in the German Democratic Republic: Production and Reception. Ed. By Kyle Frackman and Larson Powell. Pp. ix + 264. Eastman Studies in Music. (University of Rochester Press, Rochester, NY, and Woodbridge, 2015. £55. ISBN 978-1-58046-916-0.)

Over the past decade or so, there has been a sustained effort to rethink the musical culture of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Key to this project has been the rejection in Cold War scholarship of totalitarian models; if government control in East Germany was far-reaching, it was by no means all-encompassing. The heterogeneity of the state can be observed from a musical perspective on various levels. It was manifest, for example, in the competing aesthetic ideologies that vied for position among cultural elites; in the chasms that existed between the narratives of the socialist canon that were spun by the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) and the realities of programming in East German concert halls; and in the vagueness of socialist realism, which allowed for considerable liberties to be taken in its name.

The question of how to capture these pluralities has been paramount for scholars working in the area. There has been a concerted drive in recent years to abandon top-down approaches and develop more sophisticated modes of interpretation that grant agency both to the artists who worked in the GDR and to the music that was produced there. This collection of essays is positioned as the latest contribution in this vein. Conceived by Germanists Kyle Frackman and Larson Powell in response to a perceived neglect of classical music in GDR studies, the volume contains twelve essays on disparate aspects of both the reception and production of art music in the GDR. There are advantages in casting the net this widely. Composers, performers, and musicologists faced many of the same issues, and parallels can be drawn between the aesthetic trajectories of canon reception and composition. In the case

of this volume, however, breadth arguably comes at the expense of focus. The essays are not grouped thematically, and in the absence of any meaningful discussion from the editors as to how the different topics and approaches fit together, readers are obliged to work hard to draw coherent threads across the collection.

The editors' own interests appear to lie primarily with East German composition, and much of their Introduction is devoted to questions of its value and legacy. This, it must be said, is a particularly thorny issue. The dominance in musicology of aesthetic benchmarks associated with western modernism has rendered the evaluation of socialist composition difficult, a problem that has been compounded by the tenacity of Cold War mindsets. Despite ample evidence to the contrary, the tendency to place Soviet Bloc composers in neat categories of conformism and dissidence, and to assume a clear mapping between political dissidence and expressions of musical modernism, has been hard to shake.

Frackman and Powell rightly argue that a 'new evaluation' of GDR composers is needed, 'one no longer encumbered by the ideological assumptions of the Cold War.' (p. 6) They are less clear, however, about what this new evaluation might involve. They advocate more interdisciplinarity without going into details of the methodological advantages that this could bring. They also assert the need to examine GDR music in wider geographical contexts. While the latter goes without saying, and is an approach that has featured prominently in recent scholarship (see, for example, David G. Tompkins, *Composing the Party Line: Music and Politics in Early Cold War Poland and East Germany* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2013)), it is also the case that such comparisons do not automatically lead to new insights. Indeed, without nuanced interpretation, they can reinforce rather than confront existing perceptions.

Such is the case here when Frackman and Powell invoke the Soviet Union to contextualise East German dissidence, and observe that 'there is no GDR composer whose

work could be seen as unequivocally dissident, as was that of Shostakovich' (p. 7). Putting aside the questionable designation of Shostakovich's works as being 'unequivocally dissident', this analogy obscures key differences between Soviet and East German artists. That the latter retained their commitment to the principles of state socialism, even as their relationship with the SED soured, reflected their experiences of the Third Reich and the resulting conviction that socialism was the only option for a post-fascist Germany. Notably in this context, it was not only Paul Dessau, as the authors observe (pp. 17-18, fn 38), who supported the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961; so too did the oppositional poet and songwriter, Wolf Biermann, whom they cite as an exponent of reform socialism. (See for, example, his 2011 interview for Deutschlandfunk: http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/ich-sollte-die-menschheit-retten.694.de.html?dram:article_id=70425)

Equally, the comparisons drawn in the Introduction between GDR composers and their western counterparts rehearse old binaries of socialist realism/modernism rather than offering any new insights. Frackman and Powell describe the dominant aesthetic style of the early GDR as a 'slightly backward-looking version of modernism'. East German composers, they claim, were at home when composing in a 'prewar, Weimar conception of musical modernity', but on less 'secure ground' when 'attempting the sort of abstraction pioneered by Stockhausen in the 1950s' (p. 7). As an example of the latter they offer Dessau's experimental *Quattrodruma* of 1965. Yet, Dessau, like most of his compatriots, was neither trying to emulate Stockhausen nor working from the same aesthetic convictions.

More successful attempts to examine East German music on its own terms can found in the essays on Dessau by Matthias Tischer, and Martin Brady and Carola Nielinger-Vakil. These illuminate Dessau's capacity to operate within the confines of cultural policy while simultaneously engaging critically with the doctrines of socialist realism. Tischer demonstrates how Dessau's apparent affirmation of the GDR's 'state-legitimizing classicism'

(p. 187) in works such as his *Bach Variations* (1963) and *Orchestermusik Nr 3—Lenin* (1969) is complicated by his dialectical and often ironic approach to music history. In contrast to the essentialist view of the past so central to Marxist historiography, Dessau makes no attempt to bridge past and present. Instead he emphasises the historicity of Bach and Beethoven; historical quotations are subjected to contemporary treatments and juxtaposed alongside his own decidedly modernist idiom.

A similar approach is apparent in Dessau's score for the 1956 film *Du und mancher Kamerad*, the subject of Brady and Nielinger-Vakil's essay. The film weaves together archive footage and images from historical documentaries, news reels and feature films to construct a narrative of Germany's recent past along the lines of the GDR's founding myths. Dessau's music, with its rich web of allusions to and quotations from the socialist heritage, on some levels reinforces this state-sanctioned history. Yet, as Brady and Nielinger-Vakil demonstrate, his score does not simply reiterate events on screen. His quotations serve frequently as a counterpoint to the film, and encourage critical reflection à la Bertolt Brecht. If Dessau was a self-proclaimed socialist realist composer, his socialist realism, as Brady and Nielinger-Vakil observe, was 'neither crude nor simplistic' (p. 199).

The volume contains a number of other essays on composition with studies of Ernst Hermann Meyer's *Mansfelder Oratorium* (Golan Gur), the ballet *Neue Odyssee* (Jessica Payette), Eisler and his legacy (Martha Sprigge), Friedrich Schenker (Jonathan Yaeger), and Lothar Voigtländer (Albrecht von Massow). For me, the most interesting of these are the ones that illustrate the scope for creativity that existed in the state. It is refreshing, for example, to see attention being given to Schenker and Voigtländer, two of the GDR's most compelling composers. The musical analysis in the volume is, however, of variable quality and is limited at times to purely descriptive accounts of the music at hand. It is also the case that some of the essays would have benefitted from more editorial involvement. In particular, something

seems to have been lost in translation in Massow's essay (translated by Tim Höllering). The train of thought is difficult to follow, and the tantalizing insights offered on Voigtländer's music are marred by a lack of detail.

Three essays that might logically have been presented together are Peter Kupfer's study of Wagner in the GDR, Johanna Yunker's examination of Ruth Berghaus's Mozart stagings, and Julianne Schicker's discussion of Mahler reception. Of these, it is Yunker's essay that offers the most original perspectives. She demonstrates how Berghaus translated her idiosyncratic brand of Marxist feminism for international consumption in her productions of *Don Giovanni* for the Welsh National Opera in 1984 and East Berlin's Staatsoper in 1985. Kupfer takes a more empirical approach providing a statistical overview of Wagner productions in the GDR. A series of bar graphs details the number of new stagings that were produced each year; the frequency with which individual operas were performed; and the repertory share devoted to Wagner in the state's major opera houses. This data illustrates some clear trends in Wagner reception, highlighting, for example, the significant decline in new productions from the mid-1960s onwards. Kupfer's analysis does not, however, throw up anything startlingly new, and is essentially a succinct summary of existing research on the topic.

Schicker's essay on Mahler paints a monodimensional picture of the GDR, which inadvertently exposes the pitfalls of totalitarian interpretations of dictatorship. She argues that officials and musicologists—presented here as a synonymous bunch—dismissed Mahler on ideological grounds, and incorporated him only reluctantly into the socialist canon in response to his promotion by Kurt Masur and the Leipzig Gewandhausorchester in the 1970s and 1980s. This account, which is predicated on an odd moral opposition between East German performers and musicologists, obscures more than it reveals, not just about Mahler reception but also about musicology more generally in the GDR.

For starters, although it is true that Mahler was not the subject of any sustained scholarly research in the early GDR, he was never really considered to pose any significant ideological problems. Indeed, Ernst Hermann Meyer tellingly extolled his progressive virtues at length in his seminal 1952 treatise on socialist realism (*Musik im Zeitgeschehen* (Berlin: Henschel, 1952), pp. 64-5). As such, the reasons for Mahler's side-lining from East German scholarship are more complicated than Schicker suggests, including variously the legacy of antisemitism; his lack of any concrete geographical links with the GDR; and the tendency in East German musicology to focus on composers who had been born in the GDR's golden age, which ended in 1848. Similarly, while Masur undoubtedly contributed to the renewed interest in Mahler in the 1980s, other factors again played a part. Not least was the wide scale reassessment by musicologists in the 1970s of romanticism and nineteenth-century culture.

A more discriminating treatment of East German musicology can be found in Lars Fischer's insightful reassessment of Georg Knepler. Fischer's essay charts the latter's transformation from Zhdanovism to a more critical brand of Marxism, a process that reveals not only Knepler's own complicated relationship with the state but also the extent to which Marxist aesthetics remained productive for intellectuals even as they struggled with state ideology .

The final essay to be considered—actually the first in the collection—is Tatjana Böhme-Mehner's study of music in the provinces. While scholars have tended to focus their attention on the GDR's major cities, musical life in East Germany's provinces was much richer than might initially be assumed. Postings to small regional theatres and musical ensembles were, for example, not only a part of the standard career route for aspiring artists, but also a not-uncommon outcome for established artists who had fallen out of favour with the regime. Moreover, as Böhme-Mehner argues, distance from the state's centralised power mechanisms often brought with it a degree of artistic freedom, allowing for levels of

experimentation that might have drawn censorship in Berlin. Böhme-Mehner leaves no doubt that more consideration needs to be given to provincial life in studies of GDR music. Her essay is short, however, on detailed examples and draws on a very narrow range of source material. As a consequence, it can be viewed as more of a starting point than a definitive statement on the topic.

Frackman and Powell present *Classical Music in the German Democratic Republic* as something of a call to arms, as a corrective to ‘the assumption that all artworks in the East German context must be purely “propaganda” or the result of government directive’ (p. 2). In some respects they achieve this aim. In particular, the collection does much to illuminate neglected repertoires. The extent to which it offers any overarching reevaluation of East German musical culture, however, is less evident. While several of the essays contain fine work and offer genuinely new perspectives on GDR music, the quality across the board is not consistent, and on occasion the book perpetuates the very problems it seeks to address.

Elaine Kelly